

'The University of Trash'—or, 'How to Frustrate an Art Dealer'

Sculpture Center hosts a DIY course in pedagogy as practice

By Martha Schwendener

'The University of Trash'

Sculpture Center 44-19 Purves Street, 718-361-1750 Through August 3

The history of art education is as complicated as the history of art. Workshops gave way to academies, then artists rebelled against the academies—and ended up forming their own artist-run schools like the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. More recently, getting an MFA has been likened to getting an MBA: It's about accreditation and career-launching. A harsh assessment, perhaps, but few artists showing in New York haven't been through the system.

Now, pedagogy as a kind of art practice has reached critical mass. Growing out of '90s Relational Aesthetics (or what French curator Nicholas Bourriaud branded as such, since the idea is really just about social exchange in lieu of object-making), the exhibition-as-laboratory or -workshop quickly morphed into the exhibition-as-classroom or -lecture-hall. The bull art market served as a perfect foil, since "social practice"—Joseph Beuys's term "social sculpture" is also back in heavy circulation—was harder to package and sell than Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst sculptures, which made the "new," experiential model look admirably market-critical.

"Utopia Station" at the 2003 Venice Biennale included talks and lectures but didn't call itself a school. Then came "unitednationsplaza" (2006–2007) in Berlin, an "exhibition-as-school" conceived by Anton Vidokle. The most ambitious—and, to my mind, complicated—example, however, took place in New York last year. Organized by Vidokle and sponsored by the New Museum, "Night School," despite its folksy, democratic-sounding moniker, revolved around a "core" group of year-long participants—art-world types selected from a pool of applicants—and a roster of art stars giving public presentations to packed houses of (mostly) art students.

Taraneh Fazeli's article/review of "Night School" in the current *Artforum* provides an interesting auxiliary document. Fazeli, a "Night School" core member, calls the project a "productive failure," but what's particularly amusing is the dense prose she uses to soften the blow ("sites of knowledge production," "formats of mediation," "the acts of discourse formation and reception"), reminding us that language is *still* ground zero for pedagogical politics. (Virginia Woolf's critique of Victorian educational disparities, "On Not Knowing Greek," comes to mind.)

Now there's "University of Trash" at SculptureCenter, organized by Michael Cataldi and Nils Norman, creator of *The Tompkins Square Park Monument to Civil Disobedience* (1997) and instructor in the School of Walls and Space, a "micro-institution" within the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen.

"University of Trash," as the name implies, is framed more as an activist DIY effort. SculptureCenter's main space has been divided into little stations, including a scruffy office, a Romper Room chill-out pen, a band shell playing silent art videos, and cubes made from bound cardboard that you can sit on. Different parts of the installation were constructed in collaboration with the Lower East Side's ABC No Rio and students from the experimental City-as-School High School.

Workshops (see SculptureCenter's website for a schedule) range from "How to Stay Free" to "Detox! Everyday Poisons" to "Supersede Yourself" and sound like a cross between the Learning Annex and an anarchist summer camp. One of the workshops I observed, which will be offered again in August, was organized by artist Max Goldfarb and Andy Gunn of the Prometheus Radio Project ("Freeing the

Airwaves From Corporate Control"). The object was to build a transmitter to create your own radio station.

On the theoretical end is the BYOB (that's "book," not "bottle") "Capital Reading Group," which meets on Thursday evenings. Cataldi downloads Grad Center professor David Harvey's videotaped lectures on Marx's *Capital* and plays them for the group. Anyone can attend. Across the room, on the night I was there, a collective called Our Goods had set up a barter station where you could trade your stuff for a handsome, Andrea Zittel-ish work dress sewn by Caroline Woolard or a book donated by SculptureCenter.

Of course, "University of Trash" raises the same problems "Night School" did. That is, it engages, for the most part, the (relatively) closed system of the art world and legitimizes the institution: Museums and established art spaces become not just centers of power but hotbeds of intellectual activity—dissent, even! Both projects throw around similar words like "production" and "exchange," "collaboration" and "dialogue"; "utopia" also lurks in the background. Meanwhile, we're a long way from Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School, which spawned the civil rights movement, or Herbert Kohl teaching kids in Harlem. (As one artist pointed out to me recently, teaching inner-city kids is one of those activities that's simultaneously romanticized and looked down upon in the art world.)

School and art are alike, however, in that people have to feel comfortable enough to look or learn or consent to having their consciousness altered. And here's where the two projects feel distinctly different. "Night School" seemed—outside the existence of a core cadre, which, by some accounts, dwindled as the year progressed—more about creating an audience of spectators. (Fazeli's *Artforum* comment about "silent" audiences at "Night School" is telling.) The project reminded me of artist Rainer Ganahl's photographs of rapt audiences at rock-star-intellectual events, or a passage in Chris Kraus's *Aliens & Anorexia*, in which she describes a late-'70s Beuys lecture-performance as a "paramilitary affair" at which no women spoke.

"University of Trash," thankfully, shifts the emphasis away from the star system to a more grassroots and open model of participation, collaboration, and exchange. Sitting with my U-Trash classmates, listening to Harvey on the monitor discussing market fetishism and Marx's explanation of the exchange process, across the room from the Our Goods crowd, felt as conceptually integrated as anything I've experienced in a while. This is, admittedly, not populist edutainment: Harvey's lectures are lucid, though at the graduate level. But it brought back memories of studying Marx at the Grad Center with Stanley Aronowitz, whose classes followed, albeit in an unadvertised way, the same open-university model: Many of the attendees weren't registered for that or any other class at the school.

Ultimately, the exhibition-as-school concept, no matter how it's executed, is still an interesting one. Pedagogy is wrested away from its usual location, in museum education departments, which tend to be cloyingly evangelical—or targeted primarily toward kids. In that sense, both "Night School" and "University of Trash" contain a kernel of radicalism.